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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the literature on reading research and theories, this paper discusses the problems of community college students with severe reading/writing deficits, reviews the advantages and limitations of various approaches to reading instruction, and suggests a new method of word decoding. First, the paper explores the difficulties facing the student who does not overcome his/her reading/writing disabilities in college, including problems in finding and training for a job, a tendency to drop out of school, and a lack of self-esteem. The next section discusses the skills involved in the ability to read, noting that disabled readers have many of the abilities of skilled readers, but cannot communicate these abilities through the medium of print. Like skilled readers, disabled readers can understand the meaning of a passage, predict outcomes, understand social rules and expectations, separate fact from opinion, and draw conclusions, but not in relation to a printed text. Next, the paper addresses various problems and theories related to reading disabilities. This section considers the relationship between motivation, frustration, and stress; outlines the symptoms of several learning disabilities; and reviews relevant literature on word-identification strategies, vocabulary development, the significance of cues in learning, attitudinal problems such as distractibility and impulsivity, learning style, phonics, and memory. After outlining several learning theories concerning word analysis and reading, the paper underscores the need for innovations in reading instruction and recommends methods of coordinating interrelated skills and sources of information to improve student motivation and involvement. Several weaknesses in traditional methods of word decoding are examined, and a remedy based on the cue of syllabication is suggested. A dialogue illustrating the use of this instructional strategy is provided. Finally, the paper reviews learning theories related to reading instruction, highlighting stimulus-response and cognition theories. Includes 43 references. (VVC)

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Problem

A recent report from the Department of Labor, Investing In People: A Strategy to Address America's Workforce Crisis, reminds us that there are not enough skilled workers to meet the current needs and the situation is likely to get much worse. The bipartisan commission that wrote this report, made up of leaders from business, labor, and education, complain that many young job applicants are so poor in reading and writing skills that they can hardly be trained.[1] Severely disabled reading/writing community college students can be numbered among the ill-prepared population if they leave college without overcoming their reading/writing deficits to an adequate degree for placement in theworkforce.

Basic skills abilities, including literacy, are the single best predictor of drop-out behavior. This conclusion is based on the analysis of the findings by the National Longitudinal Survey (NLS) which show that a majority (50.3%) of all drop-outs had basic skills in the bottom 20% of the test score distribution.[2] Clearly, reading ability is a critical element in achieving success in college and outside.

Many severely disabled reading/writing college students feel helpless in the face of their inability to learn to read at a competent level. College students who drop out because of this disability are losers who suffer tremendous disadvantages when they leave college without earning a diploma as an increasingly sophisticated world leaves them farther and farther behind. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that most growth in occupational employment will be in high level service occupations requiring a higher degree of education.[3]

There is little doubt that those who have suffered with reading/writing disabilities over any substantial period of time are going to have serious questions about themselves and their abilities. The community college

student who cannot read and write with expected sophistication is deprived of an essential means for widening his or her interests, satisfying his or her needs for exploring new experiences and, in leisure time, promoting his or her emotional and social adjustment.

What does reading ability entail?

The skilled reader can comprehend the meaning of a passage. He can recognize that which the author specifically stated in the paragraph; he can compare, describe, define, clarify, recognize relationships; he can recognize forms of exposition and arguement. Every person, including the severely disabled reading/writing community college student, engages in this type of oral-aural communication every day.

The skilled reader has the ability to predict outcomes, going beyond what is stated. Such prediction provides the person with background needed to solve problems and to critically evaluate from the content and the context of the passage. He or she can answer such questions as--What will happen because of....., --In case this should happen to us, we must be prepared to....--to act responsibly. The severely disabled reading/writing community college student also uses these powers of prediction in everyday life.

The skilled reader has knowledge of social rules and expectations, ability to pick out missing significant details in familiar situations and in non-verbal social awareness. The skilled reader strengthens verbal concept formation and perceptual ability through gaining information about the world in its verbal and non-verbal arrangement. The severely disabled reading/writing community college students has a fund of named concepts in repertoire, as well.

The skilled reader engages in interpretive comprehension involving the

recognition of the many alternatives which the author might have meant although the author did not state them specifically. He or she draws upon background information and experience and value systems, and organizes the culled information to demonstrate relatedness to text which is specifically stated or implied in the selection, justifying evaluation and judgments, and formulating appreciations and values. The severely disabled reading/writing community college student, too, recognizes that there can be more than one answer to a given situation.

The skilled reader separates facts from opinions, draws conclusions, predicts outcomes, interprets words and phrases in context. The severely disabled reading/writing community college student does all of these things. The foreign element that is present in the reading situation, and which proves a handicap to the severely disabled reading/writing college student, is that the skilled reader can use these communication skills through the medium of print while the severely disabled reading/writing college student cannot.

Motivational Frustrations

Reading/writing failure gives a sense of inadequacy, threatens self esteem and social acceptance, and tends to promote failure. Although the severely disabled reading/writing college student is, at first, motivated to succeed, Stolz (1980) found that motivational and cognitive variables are substantially interdependent. Low motivation, caused by frustration, may be caused by lack of purpose or of knowing how to proceed to correct one's academic weaknesses.[4] Graham (1952) using the Wechsler, attributed

these differences to emotional factors related to stress.[5]

The short term memory, wherein a small amount of information is retained for a short time, is crippled in the condition known as hysteresis, the inability of short term memory coding mechanisms to keep up with the demands placed on them by too much data being presented at one time. The breakdown in the process of short term memory completion adversely affects long-term memory, wherein materials are retrieved much longer after acquisition . The severely disabled reading/writing student frequently makes kinetic reversals (mistaking 'b' for 'd'), reads entire words backwards (mistaking 'was' for 'saw'), reverses letters ('flim' for 'film'), confuses sounds (mistaking 'graduate' for 'gratitude'), and has difficulty telling right from left. [6] Penmanship is characterized by poorly formed and irregular cues, untidiness, malalignment, omissions, linkages that are too short or too long, and fusion of letters.[7] Auckerman (1971) found that the child--and how much more serious is the problem for the adult--with primary dyslexia fails to learn to read even when provided with apparently appropriate instruction, comes from a culturally educated home, is properly motivated, has adequate sensory equipment, has normal intelligence, and shows no gross neurological defects or brain pathology.[8]

The average reader initially learned to identify words through the abstraction of a variety of word-identification strategies: configuration cues, morphemic cues, phonic cues, spelling cues, picture cues, semantic and syntactic cues, and the use of the dictionary. In some schools of thought, reading has been conceptualized as the mastery of small, separate, enabling skills resulting in a marked tendency to operationalize skilled

reading as the aggregation, rather than an integration of these skills.[9] The Commission on Reading found that skills managemeant systems rested on doubtful assumptions about the process of learning to read, that an over-emphasis on skills unbalances the reading program, resulting in an extraordinary amount of time devoted to workbooks and skill sheet exercises, and led attention away from the integrated act of reading.[10] Goodlad criticized this process, finding that reading instruction in American schools emphasized "the mechanics of word recognition, phonics and vocabulary development" through the use of work sheets and textbooks.[11] Bussis & Chittendon (1987) of the Educational Testing Service caution that "linguistic knowledge in and of itself, such as knowledge of letter-sound correspondences, of phonic rules, of word meanings, is in no way tantamount to the skill of reading."[12]

Word identification refers to the ability to develop a visual memory of a word not previously encountered or learned. This skill implies that the pupil can say the spoken word that the printed word represents and that the pupil can hear the word in inner speech in silent reading (Harris, 1977).[13] It is hoped that the learner will eventually commit the word so well to memory that response to it is made spontaneously. Effortless reading depends on having a vast store of words that are recognized by sight. This requires a certain amount of sophistication not possesed by the poor reader.

In the act of reading, the student is required to locate or identify explicitly statements in the reading selection itself or in exercises that use explicit content of the reading selections. The major source of sight words

for less-handicapped readers is the material they have to read found in text books or other books written at their level. The sight words and vocabulary is specific to fields of science, social studies, and other content subject areas.[14] Needless to say, as words increase in length or decrease in frequency, they become more difficult. The memory load that is created by having to learn hundreds of new and ever less discriminable words quickly becomes excessive. Vocabulary difficulty correlates high among reading comprehension and intelligence measures.[15]

The basic level of abstraction can be formalized in terms of cue validity or in terms of set theory of representation of similarity. The significance of cues in learning is that cues help emphasize important stimuli. Traditionally, the teacher must discover when to use proper cues and how much guidance to give the learner. The extent of modifiability and amount of teaching investment necessary to bring about the change is assessed in part by measuring the student's capacity first to grasp and then to apply the skills to a variety of tasks in the field of literacy progressively less distinct from the ones on which the principles were taught, and by measuring the amount of explanation and training investment required in order to produce the desired result. Ability to deal with quantitative relationships and concepts or to think critically is limited in the severely disabled reading/writing community college student with concomitant inability to label experiences, ideas and objects. Skill at making the association required for learning is stilted because of inability to associate experiences and meanings with symbols.[16]

Other possible causes of functional illiteracy hindering the severely

disabled reading/writing college student are identified as inadequate self concept, lack of mentation, non-use of the cognitive powers that the student possesses and lack of attention. With the community college student, it is not a case of the student not paying attention, but rather in not knowing where to focus attention.

Attitude accompanying features are distractibility and impulsivity. There is high variability of rate of identificaton of reading cues from person to person because of high variability in number of questions required and speed of identification of the reading cues.[17] Great care must be exercised with the retarded reader, that extraneous materials not be permitted to come between the stimulus and the response. The teaching must be done so that, when the response is made, it is made to the proper stimulus and not to any of many other possible stimuli that might have intervened. This goal is relatively difficult to attain in the case of the reading/writing disabled, since the learner, in building reading/writing ability, must go through consecutive stages of thought development, each one incorporating the precision of the preceding stage into a more complex and hierarchical integral form of adaptation. Here is where the word recognition process suffers from many interferences used in traditional pedagogy. The process underlying this judgment has been labelled differentiation by Gibson (1975), and is the cornerstone of her theory of perceptual learning.[18]

The teacher must make certain that the tasks are interesting, relevant, and varied and that the students are motivated to engage in them.

Teachers are most effective when they allow more time to reading, proportion work time, closely monitor pupils' efforts to ensure continued engagement, provide for frequent repetition, and drill to overlearning (Smith & Johnson 1976[19]; Carroll & Chall, 1975[20]).

Research studies caution against repetitive remediation efforts in low-level basic skills and lower vocational training. The reason for this is clear: acquiring these skills holds out so little promise of a rewarding future that a life on the street or on welfare seems preferable.

Some research in learning style indicate that some students cannot perform phonic exercises as a means for developing reading ability because they do not have the auditory abilities needed to distinguish among similar sounds in words, although they are capable of learning to read.[21] However, upon consideration; this conclusion seems improbable. If a person could not distinguish among similar sounds in words, that person would not be able to communicate through listening or speaking channels either, since all words would sound the same to the person and there would be no distinguishing features by which this person could mark one word from another. The explanation given by Duane and Money (1969) seems to be more plausible. Their research suggests that poor memory for sounds during association learning is the major cause of difficulty in learning letter-sound associations.[22]

Reed (1985) contends that, if the reader cannot recognize a word as a whole word, then the reader must organize a set of sub-abilities at the next lowest level, such as phoneme-grapheme correspondences and blending

abilities to sound out and then synthesize the word. He argues that phonics, carefully taught, facilitates reading, making the students independent readers so much sooner.[23] Durkin (1968) pointed out that, since phonics does not offer help with meanings, it is productive only with words already known in their spoken form.[24]

The severely disabled reading/writing college student is faced with the fact that 220 words in the Dolch basic sight word list represent approximately 60% of words in primary grade materials.[25] Before the student can even hope to do any meaningful reading on a higher level, he must master a long list of words on the primary level. The severely disabled reading/writing college student exhibits low learning efficiency and achieves a verbal I.Q. score that tends to be significantly below the performance I.Q. Poor memory for sequencing is evident with thinking on a concrete rather than on an abstract level and difficulty remembering what is read. Recognition and speaking vocabulary is small for age and achievement on overall reading score is substantially below acceptable level.[26] Overlooked is the fact that, although, at first, the severely disabled reading/writing college student might be unable to read words in the text, the ability to read information presented pictorially and in graphs and diagrams is present within this individual. Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction of the reader, the text, and the content of the reading situation.[27] Wixson and Peters argue that skills are a "means to an end, rather than an end unto themselves."[28]

What Learning Theories Say About Word Analysis and Reading

The study of reading failure has a long history. It is extremely difficult to establish clear-cut cause and effect correlations between a cluster of factors which may at times constitute a syndrome that leads to a better diagnosis and clearer remediation. It is generally accepted that learning to read is a continuous, cumulative process and no reading skill is ever wholly learned at one time, but continues to be refined through successive stages of nurturing. The relationship between cognitive style and reading has been examined in terms of underlying information processing strategies in perceptual learning.[29] Perception goes beyond sensations and requires that the pupil must react with meaning. Perception is one of the earliest stages of processing that takes place on the stimulus input before the information reaches higher cognitive levels where decisions, comprehension, storage, rehearsel, and retrieval operations are performed. Bormuth (1971) pointed out that there was no way to decide just how difficult a passage would be for students whose abilities vary. Moreover, the background, interests, and aspirations of students affect their performance in ways that are not yet measureable. He maintained that comprehension is both one of the most important and one of the weakest areas of instruction.[30]

Unless students are involved in their own learning processes, Ausubel (1964) found, they were likely to have a lack of language skills, meaning not only a limited vocabulary but also a lack of words that extended to a lack of the very thought processes that lie behind languages.[31]

Sylvester & Kurst (1943) investigated the sociodynamic aspects of

reading problems and found them to be anxiety caused by reading failure and inadequate capacity for mastery. The disturbances in reading performance were found to be disturbances of the exploratory functions and symptomatic treatment by pedagogical methods was determined not to be enough.[32]

Introducing the skill of word decoding is only half the process. After the decoding skills have been introduced, the word must be practiced in meaningful contexts until the word becomes part of the learned repertoire and supports the reading act. Poor memory can prevent mastering of the word to an automatic level. A reader lacking fluency, that is, the ability to recall words instantaneously, will be stuck at a level of attending to the mechanics of reading and further comprehension training is unlikely to have any value.

Goodman (1978) added that reading need not follow oral development, but may be parallel to it and contribute to the general language store.[33] Mead (1962) emphasized that thinking develops through verbalizing experiences. The student uses previous experiences to interpret the words of others, which could be in error.[34] Concepts organize information which is not dependent upon the immediate conceptual array and are at least potentially nameable. Without these attributes, concepts do not yet exist. Comprehension involves ability to grasp such concepts as main idea, facts, sequence, inference, and critical thinking.[35]

Innovation Needed in Reading Instruction

Educators must, as advised by the Department of labor, find and

implement ways to promote broad personal and social development as well as functional literacy skills and knowledge. The Commission on Reading defined reading as the process of constructing meaning from written texts, a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of inter-related sources of information.[36] In the absence of coordination of the inter-related skills, a lack of involvement and motivation may ensue, which may reflect neuropsychological processing difficulties or problems in emotional health adjustment mechanisms. Motivational problems, not knowing how to correct academic weaknesses, easily effect ordering and learning by interfering with attention. They produce anxiety, fear, or fantasizing which occupy the mental processes and interfere with the reading process. The resulting inattention can be subtle, so that the reading comprehension problem may appear to reflect low intelligence, difficulty discriminating, difficulty relating separate sounds, poor blending and difficulty generalizing.[37]

Weaknesses Found in the Traditional Methods of Word Decoding

Traditionally, word-identification strategies:, word attack skills, for decoding unknown words, have consisted of configuration cues, morphemic cues, phonic cues, spelling cues, picture cues, semantic cues and syntactic cues[38] None of these cues provide the single stimulus on which the word decoding habit can rest, because these cues are not found constant in every word. Configuration cues change from word to word; morphemic cues differ in every word; each word has its own phonic makeup; each word has its own spelling; picture cues are applicable to only a relatively few

words; semantic cues cannot be utilized until the word is decoded; syntactic cues present many exceptions to the general syntactic rule.

Rather than contributing to the reading act, do not the variety of word-identificatoin strategies: configuration cues, morphemic cues, phonic cues, spelling cues, picture cues, semantic and syntactic cues, confuse the disabled reader's attempts to read? At the freshman year, the student should possess the ability to decode the 70,000 words in the abridged dictionary. If the student does not know the word, it would seem that there are only two ways he can learn to recognize the word, either as a sight word, or through a decoding process which he can apply uniformally and universally to the unknown word. It is apparent that, at this stage of physical and mental development, the constraints of the human mind to master so large a number of words at one time and the inability to know what words the student is going to need to know for a lifetime is too great a task. To attempt to learn these many words by sight is not a viable alternative. The only other avenue of learning is through a workable decoding system, whereby the student will be enabled to instantly decode an unknown word.

The person who is interested in reading is usually the person for whom reading satisfies the basic needs for self-esteem and esteem of others, curiosity, and the need for success and personal adequacy. These goals can be addressed after the words in the passage of interest to the reader have been decoded.

Suggested Remedy

Every word contains syllables. Vowels, also, are found in every word, even in the smallest word. The number of syllables in the word generally can be determined by the number of vowels in the word. According to the Biggins-Sainz tecnhique,[39] students can be taught to identify the number of syllables in the word through identifying the number of vowels in the word. The syllables are then strung together by the student the way they come in the word and word is, thus, decoded.

Class Observation

Pedro, a student in English 101 at Hostos Community College/CUNY using the cue of syllabication through location of vowels in the word, suggested in the Biggins and Sainz technique[39] expressed himself this way:

> "I break the word down by syllables, by counting the vowels: a and i and i and io, 4 syllables."
>
> Pedro continued.
> "ac qui si tion. . . acquisition?"
>
> The teacher nodded and Pedro continued.
>
> "Okay, everybody knows that one. Okay, do you know it? Do you?"
> [As group leader, he went around the group asking each student if he/she knew the word. He finally asked a student to orally supply the word.
>
> Carmen: "Acquisition. Is that right?"

The teacher interjected: "What does acquisition mean?"

Pedro: "Let me see if I can explain. Like accusing somebody of something."

Teacher (attempting to break the word down into its simpler, root, form). "Acquisition. Do you know what acquire means?"

Pedro: "I know what acquire means. Acquire means to find out."

Teacher. "Inquire means to find out."

Another student broke in.

"No, like it means you need something and you ask for it."

Teacher: "That's require. If you need something, you require it. I am talking about acquire."

Carmen" (attempting an answer) "Like you're going for an interview and you need something to get the job."

Teacher: "That's require. If you need someting you require it." (The teacher, making another attempt at explanation). "I'm talking about acquire.

Pedro (puzzling out loud) "acquisition?"

Teacher: "Listen. Acquire means to get."

Student: (nodding in understanding) "Ahhh."

Pedro. "This word is. . . ?" (pointing to the word acquisition in the book)

Teacher. "Acquisition. Acquisition is something I have acquired. Acquire is the verb, the action word. Acquistion is the noun. I bought, acquired, this book at the store. This book is my acquisition."

Pedro (still confused). "Acquire means to get. Like if I did my homework, this homework is my acquisition."

Teacher. "No, Homework is something you do. Acquire means you get something."

Pedro: "So if I buy something at the store. . . ?"

Teacher: "Right. If you buy something, you acquire it. Acquire is the verb, the action word. Now, whatever you have gotten, whatever you have acquired, that is your acquisition. Acquisition is the noun."

Pedro. "Like, if I bought a house, I acquire the house. After I have bought it, that's my acquisition."

Teacher. "Right."

Student (still puzzled). "Say that again."

Pedro: "Okay, take my pen, right? I'm selling it in the store, right? You want to buy this pen. $2.50. You pay me, right? Now, you acquire the pen by paying me for it."

Carmen. "How much?"

Pedro.(continuing to explain) "The pen belongs to you."

Carlos. "You're the owner?"

Pedfro. "You are the owner of this pen after you pay me for it. You buy it from me. You pay me for it. Now it is yours because you bought it. It belongs to you. After you acquire it from me, that is your acquisition."

Carmen. "Let's see. If you want this pen, right? You buy it, right?" . . .

The discussion continued a while longer, but in the end, the students had mastered the concepts 'acquire' and 'acquisition.'

HOW CAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES PREPARE THE ESL AND BILINGUAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT READING AT LEVELS 0.0-4.0 FOR SKILLED PROFESSIONS

What Learning Theories Say Concerning the Process Of Reading Instruction.

All learning theories agree that a stimulus can be activated by a cue. A stimulus has properties. These properties, which have a great influence on the type of process that can be or is carried out by humans, include speed of identification and different systems of information processing. This is clearly seen in the above example of student interaction in understanding the meaning of the word 'acquisition.' However, this process of information processing would not have begun unless the students were able to decode the rather sophisticated word, 'acquisition.' Clearly, the word was not a part of the students' listening and speaking vocabulary. They were able to decode the word by following the decoding process suggested by Biggins-Sainz.[39]

Auditory skills are developed earlier than reading skills and a period of time should be provided for semantic-auditory development. Auditory stimuli include hearing, listening and comprehension. It encompasses auditory acuity, auditory discrimination, auditory learning of auditory sounds and sentences, auditory comprehension and auditory memory. The students, in the example given above, practiced auditory discrimination in comprehending the subtle differences in inquire, require and acquire.

Many disabled readers exhibit tonal confusion, a weakness in their mastery of auditory skills. Kolson (1963) found that many severely disabled reading/writing students apparently need the help of actually hearing the specific sound in more direct association with its symbol.[40]

Learning theories generally are divided into stimulus-response theories and field of cognition theories. The behavioral model

(stimulus-response) holds that all learning is fundamentally a connection between a stimulus and a response, S--R bond. Learning is defined as the acquisition of new behavior patterns or the changing of behavior by the strengthening or weakening of old patterns as a result of practice or training. Reinforcement deals with conditions that, in fact, take place. It is through shaping that the very fine discriminations required in reading are produced through the process of chaining and summing up of individual acts. Skinner (1957) stated that elaborate sequences of behavior, like those required in reading, are built up.[41] The workings of the S--R theory are apparent in the teacher-student interaction described above. The word, 'acquisition' was first decoded through the application of the S--R bond, the decoding system based on recognition of syllables in the word. Through reinforcement of the fine discriminations in coming to the recognition of the meaning of the word, 'acqusiton, proceeding from 'inquire' to 'require' to 'acquire' to 'acquisition' reading ability was built up.

Retrieval is pattern completion. Pattern completion is the matching of general category network in long term memory, including the attributes and features of the cue, and the target item being searched. The cue must be part of the total category network. It is rare that a pattern is identified on the basis of a single feature . Many features must be taken into account to identify a common pattern, such as a word, because, as a rule, many features are shaped by different patterns. These invariant features are picked up by the perceptual system for processing because, among other things, they differentiate in the classes of bases that words or system processes in varied features hold, a class of pattern pairs and the

distinctive features which differentiate the impulse within that group.[42] Retrieval of examples of the meanings of the word 'acqusition' that were in the memory repertoire of student experiences came into play through interaction and discussion.

Compared to previous years, recent NAEP reading assessments are utilizing a greater variety of reading materials, for example, science fiction, newspaper articles, and fantasy, to attempt to assess students' mental processing of complex passages of information. Skills at identifying, locating, or confirming information and analyzing, interpreting and evaluating what has been read, and measuring students' reading strategies and attitudes about reading are some of the skills tested.[43] This trend strongly suggests that the decoding process for unlocking unknown words must be greatly simplified in order that severely disabled reading/writing college students can be helped to overcome their reading disabilities.

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